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ABSTRACT

Divorce changes not only the spousal relationship, but other associations as well. To study the changes in the social networks of recently divorced individuals, 40 adults (20 males, 20 females) participated in structured interviews. During the interview, data were collected on respondents' social networks and on their psychological well-being before and following marital separation. The results showed that network turnover averaged 43% for men and 40% for women. Persons most likely to be dropped from the network were the spouse's relatives, persons the spouse had known first, cross-sex associates, and married friends. After separation, the network structure decreased in size and density, and became more segmented. Males tended to have more cross-sex close associates and tended to become involved in a new relationship sooner than women. Network interaction decreased in closeness for one-third of the respondents. Parents tended to have more stable networks than nonparents. Self-esteem was lower after separation, while life satisfaction and happiness gradually increased to levels as high or higher than during marriage. This improvement came more quickly for men than for women. (BL)

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CHANGES IN SOCIAL NETWORKS FOLLOWING MARITAL SEPARATION

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Abstract

On the basis of retrospective interviews, the social networks of 40 recently divorced persons, 20 men and 20 women, were compared from one time period during their marriage to another following marital separation. Changes in networks and associations between change and psychological well-being were explored.

Changes in Social Networks following Marital Separation

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Spouses who decide to end their marriage take a critical step that alters their lives in a variety of ways. Divorce not only changes their relationship to each other, but it has far-reaching effects on other associations as well. In marriage, two individuals construct a shared network of relatives and friends. Divorce changes that network. Our friends often become his friends or her friends, and occasionally they become friends of neither.

This study looked at changes in the social networks of 40 recently divorced individuals, 20 men and 20 women. It attempted to answer the questions, What are the changes that occur in social networks after marital separation, and How are those changes associated with psychological well-being? Predictions were stated at the beginning of the study regarding expectations for change in network structure, content, and social exchange, and unless otherwise noted, findings reported here support those predictions.

Method

Respondents were obtained through the public divorce records in the Probate Court of Hampshire County in Massachusetts. Each respondent met the following criteria: They were presently at

least 25 years old, were married at least two years, separated for less than 3 years, and were living in the immediate area both prior to and following the separation. Ninety-eight males and 51 females were contacted in order to obtain 20 subjects of each sex, a response rate of 20% and 39%, respectively.

Males averaged 31.8 years in age, with a range from 25 to 43 years; females averaged 33.3 years, with a range from 26 to 48.

Females had been married slightly longer than males, an average of 9.75 years (with a range from 2 to 24 years) compared to 6.76 years for males (with a range from 2 to 17 years). Respondents had been separated an average of 23.4 months at the time of the interview.

Sixteen females were parents; 15 of these had child custody. Twelve males were parents; six of these had child custody.

Five pairs of males and females who participated had been married to each other.

Procedure

Each of the 40 respondents was interviewed during Spring 1979 in a structured interview that lasted about 2 hours. All but two were paid $8.00 for their participation.

Selection of time points. One of the objectives of this study was to look at network change from before to after separation. In order to do so, I fixed two time points for each respondent. Time 1 (Before Separation) was determined by having the respondent draw a time line beginning with the date of marriage and ending at the time of the interview. Significant events were plotted

along this time line, and the respondent was asked to graph his or her confidence during each of these years "that your marriage would go on indefinitely into the future." Time 1 was chosen to be the most recent time before separation when the respondent "really began to feel like a single person again." This time averaged $23.3_{\wedge}$ months before separation, with a range from 3 to 96 months. As an interesting side note, females appeared to lose confidence in their marriage earlier than males, 10 months earlier on the average. This difference indicates that women are more attuned to early signs of problems in their marriage (e.g., Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1979).

Time 2 (After Separation) was chosen to be the period of time when a respondent "really began to feel like a single person again." This time averaged 8 months after separation, with a range from 1 to 22 months. Males felt single on the average one month earlier than females.

Description of social network. Information was obtained about each respondents' social network and their psychological well-being during marriage. This procedure required three steps.

Step 1: Social network measures. The names of network members were obtained using a technique adapted from Claude Fischer and his colleagues (Fischer, 1977; Jones & Fischer, 1978). Six questions were asked about interpersonal exchanges likely to occur with the other, as for example, sharing activities, sharing common interests, sharing feelings, and so on.

After these names were recorded, a set of questions asked about the respondent's relationship to each network member, the member's sex, age, and marital status, and the respondent's feeling of closeness to each person. For Time 1, it also asked who knew the person first, the respondent or the spouse.

Step 2. Subset measures. Another set of questions asked about the 8 most important members of the network. These questions referred to how the respondent first met each network member, that person's city of residence, their length of acquaintance, the frequency and duration of their contact during Time 1, the member's employment, and the number and ages of children. Members' acquaintance with each other was also determined, which provides a measure of the network's density.

A set of fourteen questions asked about feelings and activities shared with the four closest adult members of the network.

Step 3. Respondent well-being. There were three measures of well-being, measuring self-esteem, life-satisfaction, and happiness.

After these measures were obtained for Time 1, they were obtained for Time 2 in an identical manner. The well-being measures and several other self-report measures were obtained for Time 3, the time of the interview.

Results

The information obtained from these interviews was examined for network turnover, changes in network structure and member composition, changes in social exchange, and associations between network characteristics and psychological well-being.

Network Turnover

There appeared to be a great deal of network turnover from Time 1 to Time 2. The average loss of network members was 43% for men and 40% for women. Persons most likely to be dropped were the spouse's relatives (67%),persons the spouse had known first (70%), cross-sex associates (48.5%), and married friends (38.5%). It seems, then, that network turnover is highest for the persons with whom the respondent has less in common after separation.

Network Structure

After a newly-separated person rebuilds their network, how does it then compare to their network during marriage? There were several significant changes. The first was in network size. Networks after separation were significantly smaller than during marriage, averaging 20.75 persons at Time 1 and 17.95 persons at Time 2 ($p < .01$), about three persons fewer.

A second change was in network density and segmentation. Density decreased from Time 1 to Time 2, indicating that fewer of a respondent's closest associates knew each other after separation ($p < .01$). Network segmentation is the number of subgroups of persons who know each other but do not interact with other members of the network. Segmentation increased ($p < .05$),

indicating that postseparation associates were drawn from a wider variety of contexts. These changes in density and segmentation could indicate a network in transition, where the individual is in a stage of broadening, rather than integrating, their social contacts.

Network Composition

There were changes, too, in the characteristics of network members. Respondents after separation reported associating with fewer relatives, primarily due to the loss of the spouse's kin ($p < .05$). Significantly, kin were mentioned less often as part of the closest network ($p < .05$). Measures of frequency and duration also showed that respondents after separation spent less time interacting with those kin who were still part of the 8-member subset and more time interacting with friends.

There were an equal number of friends named before and after separation. Respondents, however, chose friends significantly more often for their 8-member subset after separation ($p < .01$). This indicates that friendships were more important after separation than during marriage.

Same-sex associates were more likely than cross-sex associates at either time point ($p < .05$). Males reported having more cross-sex persons in their closest subset than did females. Females' closest associates were more likely to be females, whereas males' associates were equally likely to be male or female.

Men tended to get involved in a new relationship sooner than women. At the time of the interview, 70% of the men were seriously involved, and one had just broken off a close relationship, whereas only 40% of the women were seriously dating. The difference in the rate of involvement is particularly striking when we consider that women had been separated an average of 10.5 months longer than males. Presumably, women had had more time to get involved with a new partner, yet fewer had done so. This suggests that women are either more cautious than men, or that they have fewer opportunities for finding new partners.

Network Interaction

How does a respondent's interaction with network members change following marital separation? Average ratings of emotional closeness to network members were equal at each time point--during marriage, after separation, and at the time of the interview. Closeness to particular persons did change, however. Feelings remained constant for only one-half. For the other, ratings of closeness decreased for one-third and increased for one-sixth.

The total amount of social exchange with the four closest adult associates did not change from during marriage to after separation. The pattern shifted, however. During marriage interaction was highest for the spouse and moderate for the three other closest adult associates. After separation, interaction was divided more equally among the four closest adult associates and overall was as high as during marriage. This

indicates that individuals turn to others for social exchange when their spouse is no longer available.

One item, a measure of self-disclosure, increased for females from Time 1 to Time 2 ($p < .05$). This indicates that females more than males turn to others to discuss their experiences.

Variations in Social Networks according to Parental Status

How did the networks of parents differ from those of nonparents? Parents tended to have more stable networks than did nonparents, suggesting a tendency to stay embedded in an existing network for the sake of the children. Parents dropped fewer of their marital associates ($p < .0007$), and they had larger postseparation networks ($p < .05$), primarily because they maintained more ties with kin. For males, however, only custodial fathers showed this pattern, indicating that actually having custody of the children stabilizes a network, rather than the mere fact of parenthood.

Patterns of Respondent Well-Being

A major question of interest was, How is network participation correlated with psychological well-being? I'll first present an overview of patterns of well-being and then discuss how these patterns are associated with network structure or change.

Self-esteem was measured by three items assessing how worthwhile, productive, and useful respondents felt at each time point. Self-esteem tended to be lower after separation than during marriage ($p < .17$), but by the time of the interview it was as high as during marriage. The rise in self-esteem from Time 2 to Time 3 was significant ($p < .01$).

Life satisfaction was assessed using 10 semantic differential scales. Life satisfaction did not decrease following separation, but was equal to satisfaction during marriage. By the time of the interview, life satisfaction had increased significantly over either of the earlier periods ($p < .01$), especially for women.

Two of the ten items showed different patterns from the other eight. One item in particular (free versus tied-down) showed strong variations in men's rating across the three time points. Men felt significantly freer after separation than during the marriage ($p < .001$). By the time of the interview, they still felt freer than during marriage ($p < .02$), but less free than after separation ($p < .004$). These findings indicate that men experience a feeling of euphoria as the responsibilities of marriage are lifted from them, but this feeling is modified as time goes on.

Women, on the other hand, felt no freer after separation than during the marriage, but they did feel freer by the time of the interview ($p < .04$). This finding might be a result, in part, of the greater responsibility of childcare, as 75% of the women had custody of their children. This is borne out by the finding that the six custodial fathers showed the same pattern of slower movement toward feeling free.

On a second item from the life-satisfaction scale (difficult versus easy), we see similar differences. Men reported no change in life's ease across the three time points. Women, however, reported that life became more difficult after separation (n.s.), although by the time of the interview most saw their life equally

as easy as during their marriage ($p < .04$). Custodial fathers showed a pattern similar to women, showing that having custody of children strongly affects perceptions of one's life quality.

Happiness, the third measure of well-being, showed ratings that increased after separation, again more quickly for men than for women.

The general picture across all of the measures of well-being is that self-esteem dips after separation, while life-satisfaction and happiness gradually increase to levels as high as or higher than during marriage. This improvement comes more quickly for males than for females.

Well-Being and Network Characteristics

Let's look now at those network features which are associated with well-being. Sheer size was not a factor, showing no correlations with self-esteem, life-satisfaction, or happiness. Network turnover, however, appeared to be important for men. The more associates men dropped from their networks after separation, the less lonely they felt ($p < .05$) and the more physically attractive they felt ($p < .05$). For women, network turnover was not correlated with well-being.

The number of friends versus relatives seemed important, though differently for women and men. For women, having friends during marriage was positively associated with self-esteem, life-satisfaction, and happiness ($p < .05$). Conversely, the more relatives in the network, the lower their ratings on these indices ($p < .05$).

For men, having friends seemed important after separation. The more friends, the higher their ratings of well-being, while the reverse was true for number of relatives ($p < .05$).

It seems, then, that having friends is beneficial to either men or women, but is especially important for married women (who might otherwise feel isolated) and for single men (who probably find friends a means for getting back into a single lifestyle). Fischer and Phillips (1979), in their study of urban men and women, also noted that isolation from nonkin is strongly associated with personal unhappiness. Marriage isolates women, more than men, from nonkin. In the present study, those women who did have friends during marriage were more satisfied than those who did not. On the other hand, marriage isolates men, more than women, from confidants. In the present study, separation may have provided the opportunity for men to gain confidants.

Other findings showed that psychological well-being was higher if a majority of a respondent's associates were of their own sex and, for men, if associates were single rather than married ($p < .05$).

Another finding showed that being the initiator of the separation was also related to well-being. Initiators were less lonely, more satisfied with their lives, had higher self-esteem, and were happier than non-initiators. This was especially true for men.

Discussion

There are few institutionalized norms for social involvement after divorce. The recently separated entered a world of unmapped territory. Most lose friends, and most make new ones (Rasmussen & Ferraro, 1979; Weiss, 1975). Sometimes spouses vie for the loyalty of shared friends (Rasmussen & Ferraro, 1979), whereas other spouses each continue to have an amicable relationship with common acquaintances (Blood & Blood, 1979).

This study shows that we can expect a great deal of change in social relationships following marital separation. Postseparation networks come to resemble premarital networks. They are less couple-centered, and the spouses or friends of one's friends are less likely to be part of the network (e.g., Farrell & Rosenberg, 1977; Lowenthal & Chiriboga, 1975). Networks are more likely to be composed of single friends (e.g., Boissevain, 1974; Farrell & Rosenberg, 1977; Shulman, 1975), and they are less kin-centered than during marriage (e.g., Brandewein, Brown & Fox, 1974; Spicer & Hampe, 1975).

Some individuals are likelier to find it easier than others to rebuild a single life. In this study, parents found it easier to maintain former ties; nonparents found it easier to drop old relationships and start fresh. The younger found it easier than the older to resume a single lifestyle and to begin dating again. Females found it easier than males to talk about their problems, and the younger found it easier than the older to seek out support.

Most of the time, changes in social relationships following divorce come as a surprise. It is common to feel bitter over a friend's rejection, or over one's exclusion from occasions where one was formerly included as part of a couple. Such bitterness often lingers long after those associations have been replaced. Respondents fortunate enough to have friends at this time spoke with gratitude about those friends. Those who did not, spoke of loneliness and isolation. Often finding a new friend or deepening an old friendship provided one of the satisfactions of the new single lifestyle, one way of coping with the loss of the spouse and of married life.

Many of these respondents were pleased with their growth since the separation; this growth did not come, however, without a great deal of struggle and pain, and for some the struggle was still going on. Changes in relationships were part of both the struggle and the satisfactions of this experience.

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